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Conclusion

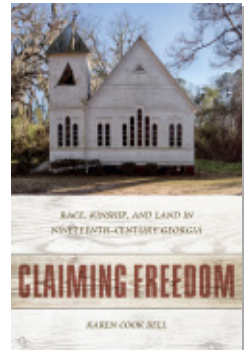
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CONCLUSION

The importation of over 12,000 Africans from West Africa and the Caribbean over the course of 48 years constituted an important cultural thread shaping the culture of lowcountry Georgia. It led to the creation of a new language structure that had a common semantic and stylistic form. This shared language made possible the reclamation of a territory—of the landscape, the manscape, and the womanscape to establish a sense of place. The cultural identity of these forced transatlantic communities emanated from shared traditions and perspectives and from intersecting relations and languages.¹ Building on both their African background and their American experience, Africans in lowcountry Georgia retained their African culture and established cultural resistance to their enslavement. Cultural resistance represented a salient form of opposition to federally sanctioned enslavement.

The establishment of rice plantations along the coastal and inland areas of Georgia in the eighteenth century created a unique environment for enslaved Africans to re-create social and cultural institutions. Functioning within the constraints of an inhumane system, Africans and African Americans established familial bonds, preserved agricultural techniques, re-created artistic expressions, maintained Islamic practices, and syncretized African religious beliefs with Christianity. In this context, narratives were integral to the cultural politics of slavery and freedom. Narratives of resistance and freedom during the pre-Civil War era occupied the consciousness of enslaved African Americans in lowcountry Georgia. Ideas were fundamental to the reality of bondmen and bondwomen. Ideological resistance combined with the internal economic strategies of African Americans to secure property served as incubators of nationalist unity and springboards for the development of oppositional communities during the era of emancipation when African Americans used cultural politics to shape and define their space in America.

Landownership symbolized African American discursive and conceptual autonomy. The symbolism of land ownership redefined the individual's existence. As Eric Foner argues, freedom rested on the ownership of productive property. In this context, the task labor system shaped the lived experiences of enslaved Africans and created an internal slave economy that informed African American postwar strategies to secure economic independence and establish land based communities.

Gardens were used to supplement diets and in the process became the de facto land and property of the enslaved.²

In the lowcountry, African Americans based kinship on fictive and nonfictive blood relationship, which served to make community. The oppression of slavery created and reinforced social ties and community. Thus, kinship and race were inextricably interlinked. Moreover, the very nature of living life in a system of perpetual bondage meant that conflict within the slave community was diminished. Above all else, the majority of enslaved African Americans endeavored to survive slavery. This common experience and identity, as Wilson Moses has argued, was “the basis of a racial unity, unknown among the various African groups before the transatlantic slave trade.”³

In many parts of coastal Georgia, rice remained a symbol of the postwar lowcountry landscape. Rice production and rice culture structured both the natural environment and the socioeconomic environment of freedmen and freedwomen and thus became an integral part of their emancipatory ideology and cultural ethos. Obtaining proprietary interest in land suitable for cultivating rice for the market, as well as for home consumption, was a significant expression of their freedom during the first decade following emancipation.

African Americans developed several strategies to sustain access to and control of land. Through individual, community, and organizational collective action, they secured modest acreage large enough to build homes and maintain family gardens. In several communities their land supported the growth of rice, which they valued as both a market crop and a dietary staple. The initiatives undertaken by African Americans to secure land through disciplined economic choices is central to understanding how African Americans claimed freedom. The extent to which African Americans were successful depended upon regional demographic factors, the degree of economic elasticity, and the relative fluidity of race relations. The formulation of overt collective acts designed to secure land and establish autonomous communities in opposition to federal land restoration represented a salient effort to translate emancipation into substantive freedom.

The postemancipation conduct of former slaves serves as an important frame of reference for delineating how they created meaningful structures of resistance out of what Clifford Geertz termed “webs of significance.” In lowcountry Georgia, these webs of significance consisted of elements of culture that African Americans created and re-created both during their enslavement and after slavery ended.⁴ The formation of Burroughs represented the apogee of African American resistance to political, economic, and social injustice and served as an exemplar of these webs of significance. The town’s charter of incorporation advanced the principles of self-help, moral uplift, and racial solidarity through its governing body.⁵

African American leaders, many of whom were former slaves, played a pivotal role in postwar politics and grassroots resistance and activism. Race leaders such as Henry McNeal Turner and Martin Delany provided the theoretical underpinnings

for discourse on the doctrines of racial uplift, emigrationism, and separatism during the post-Reconstruction period. The doctrine of racial uplift operated as the cohesive force within post-Reconstruction lowcountry communities. Lowcountry leaders such as Aaron A. Bradley, Solomon Farley, William Golding, and J. C. Legree claimed freedom through cultural, community, and kinship networks that formed the basis of oppositional communities. As African Americans claimed freedom for themselves, their culture became political through the active production of cultural meaning to their lived experiences.